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# In Defense of Classical Geopolitics

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Mackubin Thomas Owens

THE FORMULATION OF national strategy is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including the past history of the nation; the nature of the regime; the ideology, religion, and culture; economic factors, to include technology; and governmental and military institutions.<sup>1</sup> When Albert Einstein remarked that "politics is harder than physics," he had in mind the enormous number of such variables that the statesman and strategist must consider when describing international phenomena and developing prescriptive measures.<sup>2</sup>

## Geography and Geopolitics

Perhaps the most important influence on strategy making, however, is *geography*, the physical setting of human activity, whether political, economic, or strategic. As Nicholas Spykman observed, "Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent."<sup>3</sup> The geographic setting imposes distinctive constraints on a nation's foreign policy and strategy

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while at the same time providing distinctive opportunities. As Colin Gray has remarked, geography at a minimum defines the players in international relations, the stakes for which the players contend, and the terms by which they measure their security relative to others.<sup>4</sup>

Geography, the descriptive science of the earth, can be understood in a number of ways. Saul Cohen provides three definitions of geography: the "science of area differentiation," the science of "spatial relations and interaction," and the "science of distributions."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the geographer examines such physical factors as space, topography, and climate.

There are many subdivisions of geography, but those of greatest interest to the statesman and strategist are variants of *human* geography, which studies the ways in which physical factors interact with population, political institutions, culture, communications, industry, and technology. The resulting branches of human geography include *political* geography, *economic* geography, *cultural* geography, *military* geography, and *strategic* geography.<sup>6</sup>

A form of geographic reasoning that necessarily encompasses all these branches is *geopolitics*, "the relation of international political power to the geographical setting."<sup>7</sup> Geopolitics is essentially the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography to the pursuit of international power. As such, it is most closely related to strategic geography, which is concerned with the control of, or access to, spatial areas that have an impact on the security and prosperity of nations.

### The Post-Cold War Security Environment: Contending Perspectives

The end of the Cold War has generated a number of competing candidate descriptions of the international environment, some of which essentially proclaim the "end of geopolitics." Optimistic nongeopolitical descriptions of the post-Cold War international environment include Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, which argues that the end of the Cold War represents the final triumph of liberal democracy over its twentieth-century ideological competitors, fascism and communism.<sup>8</sup>

Other optimistic nongeopolitical visions of the future world include "global interdependence," the idea that the pursuit of power in its geographic setting has been supplanted by liberal economic cooperation. According to such analysts as Richard Rosecrance and Jessica Mathews, the near future will feature borderless economic interdependence and the end of the nation-state.<sup>9</sup>

Pessimistic nongeopolitical images of the future include Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" and Robert Kaplan's "coming anarchy." Huntington claims that "fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed."<sup>10</sup> Kaplan contends that in the future much of the globe will be consumed

by ethnic, racial, and religious strife unleashed by the failure of territorial states to protect the lives and property of those who live within their borders.<sup>11</sup>

Some have proposed semigeographic but nongeopolitical views of the future. Prominent among these are concepts of "core" and "periphery," "pivotal states," and "geo-economics." Immanuel Wallerstein proposed the core and periphery as part of his neo-Marxist model of world politico-economic development. According to Wallerstein, the capitalist world economy created a single global unit, generating two fundamental inequalities: the traditional class inequality identified by Marx between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and the spatial inequality between the states of the developed capitalist core and those of the nondeveloped periphery.<sup>12</sup>

What Wallerstein identified as the capitalist core is tantamount to what the great geographer Sir Halford Mackinder called the "Midland Basin": North America and Western Europe. Most of the rest of the world is the periphery. Wallerstein's model is in essence a spatial representation of Lenin's theory of uneven capitalist development. Although the dynamics are reversed, it also bears a striking resemblance to Lin Piao's conceptualization of the world as the capitalist "city" surrounded by agrarian, revolutionary "countryside."<sup>13</sup>

Non-Marxists like Barry Buzan have adapted the core-and-periphery concept to "structural realism." One component of this application is the notion that while multipolarity is emerging among the capitalist great powers, the ideological harmony within the core has lessened the importance of military power among states within the core, but not between the core and the periphery.<sup>14</sup>

The pivotal-state concept is geographical in that it argues that certain states are important to the stability of entire regions. It is, however, nongeopolitical in that it does not explicitly describe a hierarchy among those regions.<sup>15</sup>

Geo-economics purports to place international politics on an economic basis. In the words of Edward Luttwak, "Everyone, it appears, now agrees that the methods of commerce are displacing military methods—with disposable capital in lieu of firepower, civilian innovation in lieu of military-technical advancement, and market penetration in lieu of garrisons and bases. States, as spatial entities structured to jealously delimit their own territories, will not disappear but reorient themselves toward geo-economics in order to compensate for their decaying geopolitical roles." In geo-economic state rivalry, the "logic of conflict" will be expressed in the "grammar of commerce."<sup>16</sup>

Adherents of geopolitics argue that to be of any use to the statesman and strategist, these various descriptions of the future must be placed within a geopolitical context. Real international relations occur in real geographical space. The relative importance of a given geographical space may be modified by technology or the infusion of capital, but geographical space cannot be ignored, as several of these approaches do.

## Geopolitics, Con and Pro

Despite widespread use of the term, the concept of geopolitics is controversial. To some, it smacks of a particularly crude form of geographic determinism; to others, it represents nothing more than a justification of international aggression. The term itself is derived from *geopolitik*, which during the interwar period became synonymous with "the German science of statecraft" embraced by the Nazis.<sup>17</sup> Its American form underlay the strategy of containment, and in the eyes of many critics it led to the rigid divisions of the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> Marxists and adherents of "critical geopolitics" dismiss classical geopolitics as a rationalization for American imperialism.<sup>19</sup>

Some students of international relations argue that geopolitics is banal, that it is a pretentious word adding nothing to the important debates regarding international relations, foreign policy, and strategy. Others hold that since geopolitics is wedded to the concepts of military power and the territorial state, the importance of geopolitical reasoning is in decline as nonstate actors in the international political system increase in importance. A corollary of this perspective is that since the pursuit of prosperity is supplanting the quest for power in international affairs, geopolitics has been superseded by the aforementioned geo-economics, or even "geopolinomics."<sup>20</sup> Still others contend that although a geopolitical perspective may have been useful in the past, advances in technology, particularly airpower, nuclear weapons, and information technology, now render it moot.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the misunderstandings associated with "geopolitics" arise from the fact that the term itself is heterogeneous: it has been used to mean everything from geographic determinism to the spatial dimension of political inquiry to merely an analytical way of thinking.<sup>22</sup> It is used here to mean a normative-strategic doctrine: geopolitics is *descriptive* in that it helps us understand the world as a whole, and *prescriptive* in that it suggests strategic courses of action.

Although there have been "idealistic" geopoliticians, especially those who envisioned an American response to the German *geopolitik* of World War II, geopolitics as employed here is very much a part of the Realist tradition. Indeed, it can be understood as the description of the spatial aspects of power politics, as modified by technology and economics, and their strategic implications—*realpolitik* manifest in geographic space.<sup>23</sup> Geopolitics makes certain claims: there is an international pecking order, determined by who has power and who does not; power is rooted in the physical nature of the world itself; the power of the modern state has some relation to the territory that it occupies, controls, or influences; resources and strategic potential, the sources of state power, are unequally distributed worldwide; and power is ephemeral—possession is no guarantee of its permanent retention, and therefore states must take steps to ensure its retention.

Accordingly, adherents of geopolitics contend that the study of the international scene from a spatial viewpoint, by which one better understands the whole, has strategic implications. The main directions of proper strategy may be deduced from an understanding of the overarching spatial relationships among political actors: by discerning broad geographical patterns, one may develop better strategic options by which a state can assert its place in the world.

The geopolitical perspective in international relations has given rise to spatial "pivotal binaries," categories that shape how we look at the world and suggest strategic steps to enhance state power. The most enduring of them include East and West, "sea power" and "land power," "maritime" and "continental," "heartland" and "rimland," and "core areas" and peripheral "shatterbelts." These are, of course, mental constructs; but strategy is directly connected to perceptions about the geographic attributes that configure the global space in which conflict occurs. We might call these "mental maps."<sup>24</sup>

Mental maps reflect another important aspect of geopolitics: *strategic culture*. It is undeniable that different countries manifest different approaches to international politics. For instance, sea powers envision their security differently than do land powers. As Gray observes, "Distinctive political culture, which substantially determines national style in foreign and military affairs, is the product of a distinctive national historical experience—and that distinctive historical experience reflects no less distinctive a blend of national geographical conditions."<sup>25</sup>

Since geopolitics describes the nexus of geographic factors, relative power (including economic power), and militarily significant technology, these geopolitical categories tend to be dynamic, not static. This point is often lost on critics of geopolitics. Thus Halford Mackinder revised his concept of the heartland three times, and Saul Cohen modified his idea of which regions constituted the world's shatterbelts several times. Such changes reflect modified circumstances arising from changes in relative power among states, including economic development, or advances in technology.

This is a critically important point to remember: technology and economics are not extraneous to geopolitical analysis. They are integral to geopolitics. The shift in ship propulsion from sail to coal to oil to nuclear power significantly changed the geopolitical landscape, as did the railroad and the development of air power. Some analysts suggested that nuclear weapons spelled the end of geopolitics; some make that claim now on behalf of information technology and cyberspace. However, while technological advances can alter the importance of the geographic determinants of policy and strategy, they do not negate it. The same is true of economic development; the infusion of capital may modify but not negate the importance of a particular geographic space.

## Classical Geopolitics Revisited

Geopolitical reasoning has a long pedigree. It is visible in the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Aristotle. Indeed, Herodotus, the title of whose *History* is better translated as "inquiries," provides a strong geographic underpinning to his examination of the "clash of civilizations" of his time. For Herodotus, the "ways" of Egyptians, Persians, Scythians, and Greeks were heavily influenced by the physical geographical setting.<sup>26</sup>

In the late eighteenth century, Adam Heinrich Dietrich von Bülow proposed a geometrical science of strategy that some have seen as a forerunner of geopolitics. When Bülow's best-known work, *The Spirit of the Modern System of War*, appeared in 1799, Europe was divided into a multitude of small states. Based on his geometrical system, Bülow predicted that the larger states would swallow up the smaller ones, resulting in a Europe of eleven large states, none of which would be capable of further expansion. Bülow, of course, was one of Clausewitz's main targets in *On War*, but the similarity between his predictions and the map of Europe after the unification of Germany and Italy in 1866 is striking.<sup>27</sup>

What we now think of as geopolitics had its origins in fin de siècle Europe in response to technological change, primarily the revolution in land transportation, and to the creation of a "closed political system" as European imperialist competition extinguished the world's "frontiers." The various *leitmotiven* of the emerging geopolitics included the ineradicable antagonism between Anglo-American sea power and, especially, Russian land power; the inherent danger to the West of the German *Drang nach Osten*, the "drive toward the East"; the strategic importance of various geographic areas; and the changes in relative power resulting from technological advances in warfare and transport. Fin de siècle geopolitics generated two main strands of thought. One branch, *organic state theory*, primarily took root in Germany, and the other, *geostrategy*, in the Anglo-American world.<sup>28</sup>

**Organic State Theory.** Organic state theory was continentalist in outlook and heavily influenced by Social Darwinism. In his 1897 book *Politische Geographie*, Friedrich Ratzel employed biological metaphors, describing the state as an organism. According to Ratzel, international politics was a constant struggle for survival in which the state was required to adapt to its environmental conditions: the state must grow or die. For Ratzel, states derived their power and adaptability from *raum*, space—more specifically *lebensraum*, that is, wide geographical living space.<sup>29</sup>

While Ratzel saw the development of the state as an evolutionary process and political geography as a part of the natural sciences, he was always careful to employ biology only as an analogy. The Swedish Germanophile Rudolf Kjellen

was not so careful. For Kjellen, the state was in fact a living organism, as the title of his major geopolitical work indicates.<sup>30</sup> It was Kjellen who coined the term *geopolitik* to describe “physical structure,” one of the five “organs” of the state.<sup>31</sup> While both these authors left some room for statesmanship, their approaches were largely deterministic.

**Geostrategy.** The other main strand of classical geopolitical thought, geostrategy, was less focused on the state per se and more concerned with discovering patterns of state development and behavior within a broader geographic context. Alfred Thayer Mahan, a geopolitician before the term was invented, sought to demonstrate that sea power was the key to world power. Mahan identified six factors affecting the development and maintenance of sea power: geographical position, including coastlines, interconnected waters, exposed land boundaries, overseas bases, and the ability to command critical trade routes; the physical conformation of the state, that is, the nature of the coastline; extent of territory; size of population; national character; and the nature of the regime.<sup>32</sup>

Mahan’s most explicitly geopolitical work was *The Problem of Asia* (1900), in which he identified an Asian “core,” occupied by Russia. He predicted the continuation of the struggle between Russian land power and British sea power. Much of this struggle, Mahan argued, would take place within a “debated and debatable middle strip,” the zone between the thirtieth and fortieth parallels in Asia, running from Turkey to Manchuria.<sup>33</sup> This geopolitical category was the forerunner of today’s *shatterbelt* or *zone of turmoil*, which James Fairgrieve called a *crush zone* and Richard Hartshorne a *shatter zone*: an area of contention caught between two powers or geostrategic realms.<sup>34</sup>

Sir Halford Mackinder is the writer most usually associated with geopolitics, although he hated the term. Mackinder believed that changes in technology, especially the revolution in land transportation associated with the railroad, had altered the balance of power between sea power and land power, bringing the Columbian age of dominant sea power to a close. In the new, closed international global system, land power would hold the advantage.<sup>35</sup> The center of emerging land power was the Eurasian core area Mackinder first called the “geographical pivot of history” and later the *Heartland*. This core area was inaccessible to sea power and therefore capable of sheltering a land power able to dominate the Eurasian “World-Island” from its central continental fortress: “The oversetting of the balance of power in favor of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit the vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight.”<sup>36</sup> For Mackinder, Eastern Europe was the gateway to the Heartland. Mackinder’s geopolitical thesis, which influenced the victors at Versailles after World War I, was whispered by an “airy cherub” to the statesmen of the world:



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"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the world."<sup>37</sup>

Surrounding the Heartland were two crescents: a wholly maritime outer crescent consisting of the Americas, the British Isles, Australia, and sub-Saharan Africa; and a partly continental and partly maritime inner crescent, extending along the Eurasian littoral from Iberia to Siberia and including most of continental Europe west of Russia, the Maghreb, the Middle East, and continental South, Southeast, and East Asia. This "marginal region" contained the vast majority of the world's population and was the origin of most of the world's great civilizations, religions, and empires. Because of its location, Mackinder believed, the inner crescent would forever be a zone of conflict (Map 1).

In 1924, Mackinder raised the possibility that the Heartland could be balanced by the powers of the "Midland Basin," the countries that surrounded the North Atlantic or "Midland Ocean"—North America and Western Europe. In 1943, he argued that the Heartland and the Midland Basin could combine to control Germany in the future. Although we would call Mackinder a Realist, he did raise the possibility that statesmen could, to a certain extent at least, rise above the geopolitical process of world history and create effective international structures as an alternative to force as the arbiter of international politics.

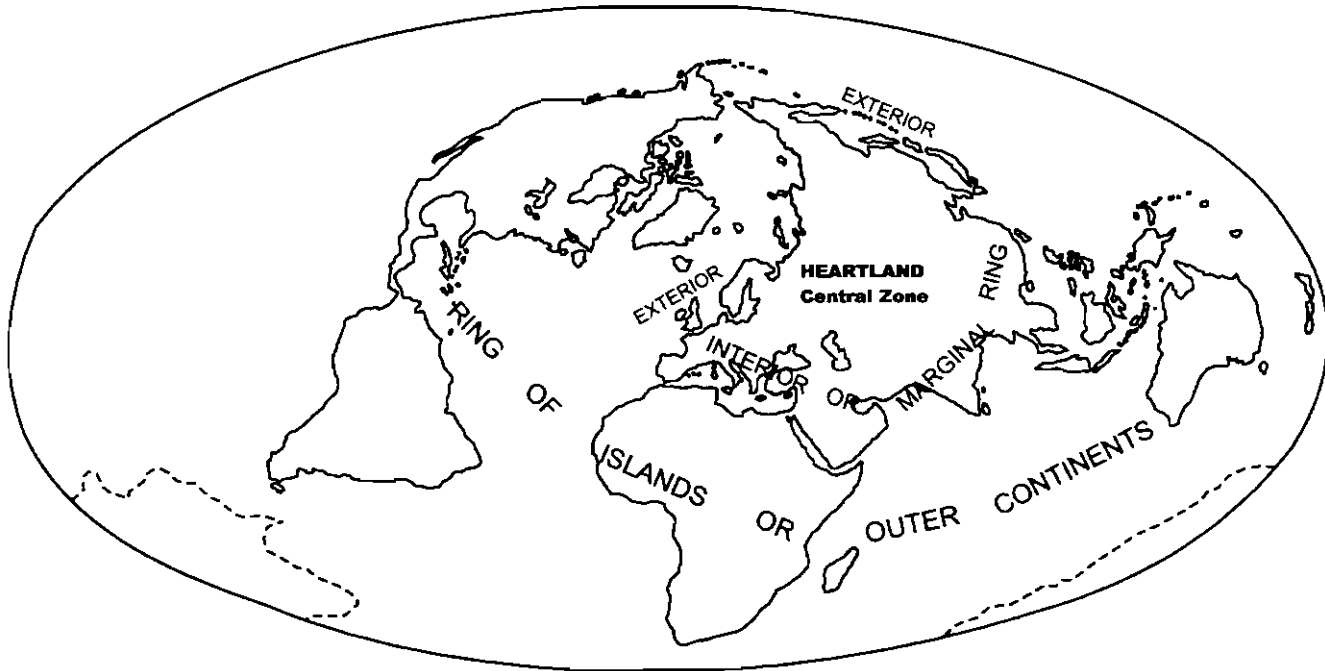
**Geopolitik.** Organic state theory and geostrategy came together in the interwar Munich school of *geopolitik*, a vindictive and expansionist ideology that has tainted geopolitics ever since. For its best known proponent, Karl Haushofer, *geopolitik* explained the defeat of Germany in World War I and offered a prescription for the restoration of German power. Haushofer appropriated such concepts as *autarky* and *lebensraum* from Ratzel and Kjellen, using them to justify Germany's *Drang nach Osten*, which was blocked by a *kleinstaatengerumpel*, literally "a rubbish of small states." This barrier of small, "artificial" states erected by the Versailles Treaty was destined to be swept away and replaced by a German-dominated new European order.<sup>38</sup>

Haushofer adopted Mackinder's leitmotiv of sea power versus land power and the importance of East Europe as the gateway to the Heartland, which Germany regarded as its *schicksalsraum*, its "space of destiny." Indeed, he advocated the alliance against which Mackinder had warned—the uniting of German and Soviet land power against the Western sea powers. He envisioned a German-Soviet Eurasian union, anchored in the east by Japan. While German global dominance was the ultimate goal of *geopolitik*, Haushofer envisaged an intermediate stage of "pan-regions": Pan-Europe (including Africa), dominated by Germany; Pan-Asia, dominated by Japan; Pan-America, dominated by the United States; and at least for a while, Pan-Russia.

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Map 1  
The World according to Mackinder (1904)

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Source: Gérard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, *Strategic Atlas* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) p. 21.

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**American Geopolitics.** *Geopolitik* and organic state theory died with the Third Reich, but before it did, it stimulated the development of a geostrategic American geopolitics that had a profound influence on U.S. policy and strategy during and after World War II. Many American geopoliticians—for instance Robert Strausz-Hupé, Derwent Whittlesey, and Andrew Gyorgy—wrote interpretive books on *Geopolitik*. Among the American geopoliticians were both “Realists” and “idealists.”<sup>39</sup> The most influential of them all was the Realist geostrategist Nicholas Spykman.

Spykman contended that Mackinder had overemphasized the power potential of the Heartland, having overestimated the impact of the revolution in land transportation and underestimated the power of the inner and outer crescents. Spykman argued that the critical geopolitical area of the globe was Mackinder’s inner crescent, which he renamed the “Rimland.”<sup>40</sup>

The Rimland could operate in both the continental and maritime modes, but it was, accordingly, vulnerable to both land and sea power. Alliances among the Rimland powers or between the Heartland and the Rimland and hostile to the United States constituted for Spykman the real geopolitical threat to America. “The Mackinder dictum . . . is false. If there is to be a slogan for the power politics of the Old World, it must be ‘Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.’”<sup>41</sup> The strategic imperative for the United States arising from Spykman’s thesis was to prevent consolidation of the Rimland by a hostile power: “Our constant concern in peace time must be to see that no nation or alliance of nations is allowed to emerge as a dominating power” within the Rimland.<sup>42</sup>

**The Geopolitics of Containment.** Spykman’s approach greatly influenced the U.S. Cold War policy of containment. Indeed, if George Kennan is the “father of containment,” Spykman is its godfather. Kennan wrote that vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the United States should follow a “policy of containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.”<sup>43</sup> Thus containment is a particular manifestation of Spykman’s dictum that the United States had a universal interest in “the prevention of hegemony, a power position which would permit the domination of all within [a hegemon’s] reach.”<sup>44</sup>

The history of containment indicates that the development of long-range airpower did not nullify geopolitics, although it certainly modified the existing framework. Alexander de Seversky was one of the few who argued that the air constituted an altogether different order of power, leading him to propose a “geopolitics of air power.” Employing an azimuthal equidistant projection centered on the North Pole, de Seversky divided the world into two great circles of airpower, centered on the industrial hearts respectively of the United States and

the Soviet Union. These circles overlapped in North America and northern Eurasia, which de Seversky called the "area of decision." Here, the United States and the Soviet Union possessed approximately equal power, and their respective industrial centers were within striking distance of each other by means of strategic bombers.<sup>45</sup> De Seversky contended that the United States should conduct its defense from the Western Hemisphere; that, with the exception of those in Great Britain, it should abandon its overseas bases; and that it should avoid small wars that sapped the strength of the nation.

Although de Seversky's approach influenced the Eisenhower administration's New Look strategy, policy makers for the most part rejected "air isolationism," maintaining that the Western Hemisphere would become increasingly vulnerable to attack unless the United States defended critical parts of the Rimland.<sup>46</sup> Thus in practice, containment represented the triumph of Mackinder and Spykman over de Seversky.

De Seversky's airpower framework is just one example of the seductive and plausible idea that technology can abolish geopolitics by annihilating the significance of space and distance. During the Cold War, Colin Gray provided the most explicit rejection of this view. For Gray, "Mackinder's notion that the future would be shaped by the opposition between sea power and land power has looked better and better as time separates us from World War II."<sup>47</sup> The Cold War, Gray argues, was a "contest between the Heartland of the Soviet Union and the maritime alliance led by the United States for control, or denial of control, of the Rimlands of Eurasia-Africa and their adjacent or marginal seas."<sup>48</sup> Due to the resulting mutual vulnerability, the development of the means for intercontinental nuclear bombardment did not negate this fundamental geopolitical framework.

Much of the Cold War bipolar competition between the Heartland Soviet Union and the maritime alliance led by the United States occurred in shatterbelts of the Eurasian Rimland. Cohen defines a shatterbelt as "a large, strategically located region that is occupied by a number of conflicting states and is caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers."<sup>49</sup> Shatterbelts are distinguished by their fragmented political and economic character:

Owing to physical, environmental, historical, cultural, and political differences, the Shatterbelt appears to be incapable of attaining political and/or economic unity of action. Parts of the shatterbelts tend to seek neutrality and lead the entire region into this path, but other portions are committed to external ties, either because of their self-interest or because of military and economic pressures from the external power centers.<sup>50</sup>

Cohen identified the Middle East and Southeast Asia as the shatterbelts of the Cold War. It was within these areas that the "domino theory" was thought by U.S. policy makers to operate. Ironically, the domino theory has been roundly criticized by many of the very analysts who believe the concept of the shatterbelt still has utility.<sup>51</sup>

### Post-Cold War Geopolitics

What might a post-Cold War geopolitics look like? To begin with, it must reject the idea that geography is the only important factor affecting international action, and it must understand geographical phenomena as complex "spatial patterns and relations that reflect dynamic physical and human processes." A useful starting point is the global geopolitical structure proposed by Saul Cohen (Map 2).<sup>52</sup>

Cohen's geopolitical structure is hierarchical. At the highest level are two *geostrategic realms*, which are "arenas of strategic place and movement." Reflecting the classical origins of geopolitics, he identifies these geostrategic realms as the *maritime* and the *Eurasian continental*. They are characterized not only by the physical characteristics of place and movement but also by cultural and strategic outlook. Realms are vast spatial areas affecting everything within their strategic-military reach.

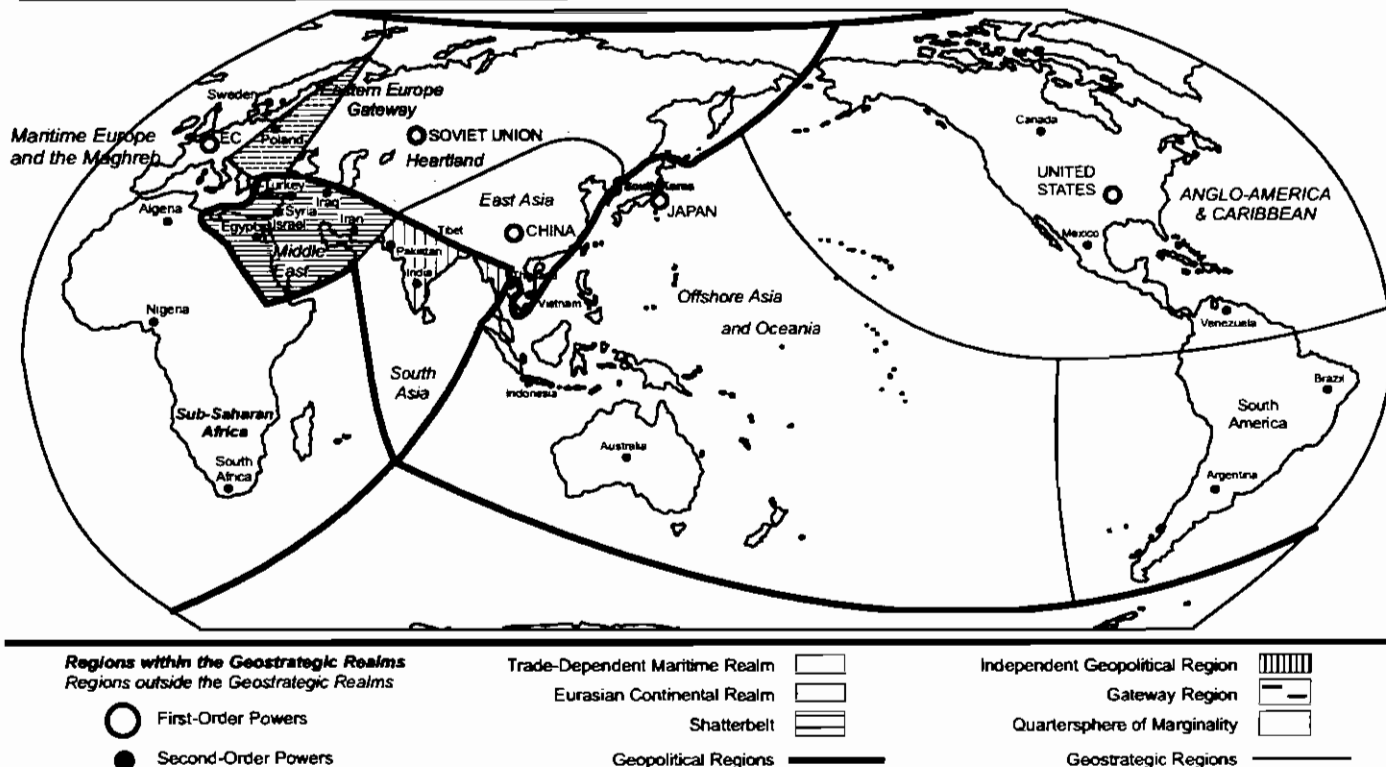
Below the realms are *geopolitical regions*, which are shaped by "contiguity and political, cultural, military and economic interaction." Cohen identifies nine geopolitical regions. Four are contained within the maritime geostrategic realm: Anglo-America and the Caribbean; Maritime Europe and the Maghreb; off-shore Asia; and South America and sub-Saharan Africa, most of which constitutes what he calls the "quartersphere of strategic marginality."<sup>53</sup> Two are part of the Eurasian continental realm: the Russian heartland and East Asia.

Of the remaining regions, Cohen argues that one, South Asia, is independent. Another, the Middle East, remains a shatterbelt. Yet another, Central and Eastern Europe, Cohen describes as a "gateway region," a transitional zone that can facilitate contact and interchange between the two realms."<sup>54</sup>

Below the regions are states, hierarchically ordered according to their power, geographical location, and function within the world system. Certain states dominate, or contend for domination of, the various regions. The United States is the "controlling state" within the maritime geostrategic realm. Geopolitical analysis suggests that China and Russia will vie for that position within the Eurasian continental realm.

Such an analytical framework allows us to discern broad spatial patterns, make predictions about the future shape of the international political system, and develop strategic options for ensuring the nation's place in this system. Within this framework, a number of variables interact with geography to shape

Owens: In Defense of Classical Geopolitics  
**Map 2**  
**The World according to Cohen**



Source: Saul B. Cohen, "Geopolitical Change in the Post-Cold War Era," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, December 1991.

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the world. As we have seen, one is technology. Another, however, is the infusion of capital and economic development.

The infusion of capital can modify the relative importance of a given geographic space by, for example, shifting power centers. In the early twentieth century the core of the maritime geostrategic realm shifted from Europe to North America. On the other hand, lack of capital can consign geographical regions to the world's periphery. For instance, Cohen's "quartersphere of marginality" is peripheral largely because, with the exception of such pockets of modernity as South Africa, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, these regions are relatively untouched by "the capital flows, technology transfer, and specialization of industry that characterize the developed market economies . . . , continental Eurasia . . . , and South Asia."<sup>55</sup>

But geopolitical reasoning suggests limits to the impact of economic development. Location still matters.<sup>56</sup> Consider the relative importance to the security of the United States of Brazil and China. Some consider Brazil to be a pivotal state, but its location in South America makes Brazil relatively less strategically important than China. Even supposing rapid economic growth, Brazil does not possess the weight and position of China. While Brazil has a long coastline, it does not command the sea lines of communications of great maritime, manufacturing, and trading powers. China does. Indeed, in all respects, China possesses the geographic location, extent of territory, and number of population to affect the international order for good or ill.

What are the strategic implications of geopolitical analysis? How do they differ from those of the other assessments of the post-Cold War international political system? First, geopolitical reasoning suggests that the consistent concerns of the geopolitical tradition—that is, the geographical correlation of power, the identification of core areas, and the relationship between maritime and continental capabilities—will continue to shape U.S. policy and strategy. Second, geopolitical reasoning suggests that the overarching strategic imperative of the United States will continue to be to prevent the rise of a hegemon capable of dominating the Eurasian continental realm and of challenging the United States in the maritime realm. In other words, future American regional strategic priorities will resemble those of the past.

There are several further implications of geopolitical reasoning. Among the most important, the first is that the United States should maintain sufficient land power to influence Europe and East Asia, keeping in mind that it cannot be a land power beyond North America without also being a sea power. Second, Nato should be expanded in order firmly to anchor *Mittleuropa* to the maritime realm. This is important because, detached from Western Europe, the region of Central and Eastern Europe may revert to its traditional role as a shatterbelt. This is also true of the Balkans; there is substantial evidence to support the contention that the region is reemerging as a shatterbelt. Third, there are limits to

improved relations between the United States and Russia on the one hand and with China on the other. Neither Nato nor the United States–Japan relationship should be sacrificed based on the hope or expectation of an entente with Russia or China. Fourth, concerns about drugs, environmental degradation, migration, and economic chaos in Africa and South America—the quartersphere of strategic marginality—should not divert the United States from its perennial overarching strategic goal of preventing the rise of a Eurasian hegemon. Fifth, space, distance, and the fact that South Asia is an independent geopolitical region limit the ability of the United States to affect directly the emerging India–Pakistan arms race.<sup>57</sup> Sixth, because of oil and strategic location, the Middle East shatterbelt will continue to be a zone of turmoil. Without a strategic U.S. presence, this turmoil could spread to affect the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean in one direction and Central Asia in another.

### Limits, Opportunities, and International Politics

Napoleon defined strategy as the art of using time and space. His focus was the operational level of war, but his definition applies as well to the level of grand strategy. Geopolitics provides the link between geography and strategy. Geopolitics is based on the undeniable fact that all international politics, running the gamut from peace to war, takes place in time and space, in particular geographical settings and environments. It then seeks to establish the links and causal relationships between geographical space and international political power, for the purpose of devising specific strategic prescriptions.

Geopolitics is not geographic determinism, but it is based on the assumption that geography defines limits and opportunities in international politics: states can realize their geopolitical opportunities or become the victims of their geopolitical situation. One purpose of grand strategy is to exploit one's own geographical attributes and an adversary's geographical vulnerabilities.

Geopolitics is dynamic, not static. It reflects international realities and the global constellation of power arising from the interaction of geography on the one hand and technology and economic development on the other. Technology and the infusion of capital can modify, though not negate, the strategic importance of a particular geographic space.

Finally, geopolitics clarifies the range of strategic choices, providing a guide for achieving strategic efficiency. While it places particular stress on geographic space as a critically important strategic factor and source of power, it recognizes that geography is only a part of the totality of global phenomena.

As Colin Gray observes, geopolitics is “a word—as well as a basket of associated ideas—that all but begs to be abused by the unscrupulous.”<sup>58</sup> Properly understood and employed, however, geopolitical analysis is an indispensable part of strategy making.



## Notes

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